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ABSTRACT

Since taking power, the Sandinista government has made a commitment to educating all Nicaraguans. Under its direction, literacy increased from approximately 50 to 88 percent. Thousands of new teachers were hired, and the number of elementary schools doubled. The official language is Spanish, and the dominant culture, Mestizo (mixed Spanish and Indian). In Nicaragua's coastal Caribbean Region there are several ethnic Indian groups, among which are the Miskito and Sumo, who maintain their own language and unique way of life. The indigenous population has resisted immersion into the national culture, and the use of Spanish as the language of instruction. As a result, the government has made an effort to accommodate their specific educational needs. Native Miskitos and Sumos are trained as instructors to teach in their own area in the native language. Materials have been specially prepared to reflect the Indian language and culture in an effort to make education more relevant. A 14-item bibliography and two maps are included. (Author/JB)

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NICARAGUA: EDUCATIONAL POLICY FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES

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Fall, 1988
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NICARAGUA: EDUCATIONAL POLICY FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES

Nicaragua's popular revolution removed what has been widely recognized as a repressive dictatorship and foreign dependent capitalist system for a fledgling socialist nation. Its new leaders state that they are dedicated to recreating the country under more equitable and democratic ideals. Their first priorities were the health care and education of the masses who they identified as having been neglected previously.

GEOGRAPHICAL INFLUENCES

The nation has a history of internal political instability and civil conflict, aggravated by repeated external interventions. Its central position and sparse population has left it open to maneuvers and conflict within and across the isthmus. It is the largest Central American country (approximately 57,000 square miles) with one of the least dense populations (approximately 2,825,000 people).

The country is divided into three distinct geographic regions: the Pacific Region, the Atlantic Coast or Caribbean Region and the Central Highlands. Geographical features of these regions have had an influence on educational opportunity for their

inhabitants. Approximately 60% of the people live in the plains and adjacent mountains of the pacific Region, 30% in the Central Highlands and 10% along the Atlantic Coast.

The Pacific Region is a fertile area which includes the nation's capital, Managua, most of the important economic and political centers, and almost all the nation's industry. It contains a range of active volcanos bordering the coast and the fertile Great Rift Valley with the largest freshwater lakes in Central America - Lake Nicaragua and Lake Managua.

The Atlantic Coast Region, which covers about half of the nation's territory, is one of the wettest tropical rain forests in Latin America. Rainfall is measured between 250 and 640 centimeters (98 and 250 inches) per year. The soil is leeched and infertile, and the area is subject to coastal flooding and periodic hurricanes. Native inhabitants typically have been fishers and hunters. Around the port cities, trade and commerce have developed.

Separating these two Regions is the Central Highlands, a cool mountainous area, relatively undeveloped and sparsely populated by Mestizo (mixed American Indian European) peasant farmers. For centuries, this area has proven to be a formidable geographic barrier between the two coastal regions and their diverse cultures.

HISTORICAL SETTING

The two coastal regions have developed separately

since pre-Spanish times. Each has been shaped by different cultural, economic and political forces.

Spanish influence on the West Coast The pre-Columbus indigenous culture of the Pacific Region was closely related to the Aztec and Mayan civilizations to the north in Middle America. There were many similarities in town structure, government organization, social structure and cuisine. They had a highly developed system of social class and a centralized government.

During the Spanish conquest, the Spaniards took over the Pacific Coast natives' centralized governmental structure, and either eliminated or assimilated the Indian population. Eventually, the area was dominated by the Spanish culture. Spanish became the official language and Roman Catholicism the principal religion.

Varied influences on the East Coast The Atlantic natives were more culturally similar to the southern indigenous civilizations of South America. Their government was less developed and more diffuse. Tribal units were made up of numerous independent extended families.

The Spanish were never able to dominate the Eastern Coast, and eventually abandoned their efforts to colonize it. Neither the Spanish language, the Catholic religion nor the Spanish patterns of rural administration or bureaucracy developed there.

The Atlantic Coast came under the British sphere of

influence. From its Caribbean administrative seat in Jamaica, the British were in a better position to influence the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. They did not settle or colonize the area, but established their presence through trading contacts.

The Miskito Indians (originally called the Bawihka) first traded with the English, who offered guns and ammunition in return for food, water and other supplies. This gave the Miskito a military superiority over the other indigenous coastal groups and they soon became the dominant ethnic group.

Escaped Black slaves frequently mixed with the Miskitos, taking on their indigenous way of life. Creoles from the Caribbean Islands migrated to this area increasing the Black and Miskito populations.

In the 1840s German Moravian missionaries came to the Atlantic Coast. This Protestant sect was well accepted and had a great influence on the inhabitants. The church established schools where they taught the local people to read in their own language. The Bible and hymnals were translated into the Miskito and Sumo languages. The schools were primarily seminars for training the natives to become priests.

The United States also had an economic and cultural impact on the Atlantic Coast. It created a market for many of the natural resources of the area like Mahogany, Pine resin, gold, silver, bananas and ocean turtles. This

trade reinforced the use of the English language.

It was not until 1860 that the Atlantic Coast was recognized as a state of Nicaragua, as a result of the Treaty of Managua (between Nicaragua and the United States). At that time the state was given the name of Zelaya, after General Jose Santos Zelaya, president of Nicaragua from 1893 to 1909. Zelaya was the first to formally incorporate the Atlantic Coast into the nation.

ETHNICITY

Today the ethnic make-up of the nation is approximately 70% Mestizo, 17% White, 9% Black, and 4% Indigenous. The Black and Indigenous populations reside predominantly on the East coast where English is the main language. Spanish is widely used by all groups as a second language.

Of the indigenous groups, the Miskito people and language are dominant. The Sumo (about 8,000 people) are struggling to overcome Miskito dominance and maintain their own language. The Rama (about 500 strong) speak Creole. Only a handful are left who can speak the original Rama language (Diskin et al., 1986:20).

PREVIOUS EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURE

Statistics indicate that educational policy under the earlier Somoza dynasty (1936 - 1979) favored the middle and upper class urban dwellers. Literacy was approximately 50% nation-wide, with a low of 10 to 20% in

the rural areas. Here schools were almost non-existent. Although the peasant population comprised 65% of the total population, they received only 30% of educational funding.

The low literacy rate can be attributed to a feudal social system associated with lack of schools, electricity, running water, transportation, communication and basic health care for the rural population. According to two who worked for the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade in 1980. "The development model of export agriculture depended upon a large pool of unskilled workers, and therefore it neither required nor encouraged an educated labor force. Politically, it was unwise for Somaza to undertake a genuine nationwide literacy program. Basic education would have provided the poor and disenfranchised with the potential tools to analyze and question the unequal power relationships and economic conditions under which they had lived." (Cardenal and Miller, 1980:4)

Whether intentional or not the greater opportunity offered upper class urban children had a consequence for the ethnic population. In 1964 the average level of formal education for urban children was two and a half years and for rural children, one and a half years. Less than 10% of the rural students who enrolled completed primary school (Rudolph, 1982:88,89). This meant that very few were eligible for secondary school, and only about 1% qualified for a university education.

School libraries were poorly stocked, textbooks

were obsolete, and instruction was based largely on a memorization of facts and figures. About 23% of the school-aged children in cities and about 6.5% in the rural areas actually attended school (Postlethwaite, 1985:3522). The whole school system including teacher training programs was deteriorating.

The Atlantic Coast had the lowest level of literacy - between 10% and 20%. In the few public schools that existed, all instruction was given in Spanish. Education was often considered by parents to be irrelevant to the practical skills necessary for rural fishing or agricultural work. Although education was free and compulsory it placed a financial burden on the family for the cost of books and materials. The loss of children's help with the family fishing or farm plot and transportation to distant towns to attend the closest school were other deterrents to formal education.

PRESENT EDUCATIONAL POLICY

In contrast to Somoza, the stated policy of the Sandinista government encouraged the development of an informed populace capable of intelligent participation in the growth of the nation. In the National Development Plan for Nicaragua, nation-wide literacy is one of the highest priorities. According to Gander (1983:188), the new government is trying to create a new society by instilling pride in Nicaraguan history and culture. It actively promotes the values of collectivism, austerity and hard work

to facilitate national reconstruction and development. It believes that education and overall development of the country are highly correlated.

Basic principles for the new educational system were formulated from a national survey in the form of a questionnaire sent to 30 basic social organizations. From the results of the survey the government formulated its educational policy. Four major goals resulted: 1) a structural transformation of the society, 2) a productive way of life for the development of the new society, 3) an incorporation of the basic principles of the Sandinista revolution, and 4) an understanding of the ideology and example of the heroes and martyrs of the revolution (Postlethwaite, 1985:3522).

Educational objectives were derived from these four fundamental policy goals. The objectives include: strengthening national identity, associating teaching and research with the lives of the people, promoting respect for individual rights, stimulating a liberating conscience and an analytical, critical and participatory capacity in students, offering humanistic, political training, and training human resources for development of the country (Postlethwaite, 1985:3522).

IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY

In order to implement its new educational goals, the new government undertook a National literacy campaign through formal and non-formal education. According to the

Ministry of Education, the National Literacy Crusade (Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetizacion) proposed that "...to carry out a literacy project and consolidate it with a level of education equivalent to the first grades of primary school is to democratize a society." (Arnove, 1981:245)

The literacy campaign was announced just two weeks after the Sandinistas took control of the government in July, 1979. The government sought to improve literacy by taking advantage of the enthusiasm generated by the overthrow of the previous government. They hoped to increase political support by showing their interest and concern for the rural and urban poor. Through the Literacy Crusade urban elite and middle classes mixed with the poor, both getting firsthand exposure to the differences of a class society (Sanders, 1983:34).

A primary educational goal of the literacy campaign was to achieve the functional literacy (defined as reading at a third grade level) for 50% or more of the population. Within six months the national literacy rate was reported to have increased from 48% to 87%, meaning that approximately 500,000 rural and urban poor (over ten years old) could now pass the designated exams and write simple sentences (Rudolph, 1982:90). The national literacy crusade continues today with special programs and classes for adults.

Between 1978 and 1982, the number of teachers increased from approximately 12,000 to 42,000 (Valenta and

Duran, 1987:128). School attendance increased correspondingly.

Student Enrollment

Levels	1978 (Pre-revolution)	1982 (Post-revolution)
Preschool	9,000	38,534
Elementary	369,640	534,996
Secondary	98,874	139,957
Adult	n.a.	148,369
Special Ed.	355	1,591
University	23,791	33,838
TOTALS	501,660	897,285

(Valenta and Duran, 1987:128)

By 1984 the total number of students enrolled had increased to 1,127,428 (Valenta and Duran, 1987:128). Thousands of new schools were built in all areas of the nation to accommodate increasing enrollment. In recognition of the progress, Nicaragua was awarded the 1980 UNESCO Literacy Prize.

ETHNIC MINORITIES' RESPONSE TO THE LITERACY CAMPAIGN

The literacy campaign was very successful in most areas. However, the lack of understanding between the Hispanic Sandinista government and the culturally diverse Easterners, known as Costenos, caused problems.

The Atlantic Coast Indians and Blacks who have maintained their own languages and cultures at first rejected the literacy crusade which used Spanish, the official language, as the medium of instruction. They were suspicious of the new government, as a threat to

their beliefs and values. For over a century their orientation had been commercially and politically toward the United States and England. Those from the Pacific coast, who the Costenos disparagingly call "the Spanish" were seen as a source of repression.

Since then, the government, through the Ministry of Education, has made a major attempt to integrate the Atlantic Coast groups into the political and social mainstream of the country, while respecting their cultural individuality. Adult education materials of the literacy campaign were revised to reflect the language, lifestyle and locale of the Indians, resulting not only in a bilingual but bicultural education which informally recognizes the autonomy of the coast. Reading materials were redesigned using photographs, drawings and content relevant to the indigenous people. Members of the local population were trained to work as instructors of their own indigenous groups, using the native tongue (Arnove, 1986:36).

EDUCATION PROBLEMS ON THE ATLANTIC COAST

For several reasons, the problem of education in the indigenous region still persists. First, part of the area is a war zone near the Honduran border causing gaps in trust as well as literacy training. Second, the Sandinista government interpreted the separatism of the Atlantic Coast as a threat to national unity which led to military conflict. Third, the Costenos interpreted the

government's methods as a threat to their autonomy and self-determination. Through continued negotiation, a better understanding of each other and a greater trust, progress toward mutually acceptable goals might be made.

The inhabitants of the Caribbean Coast have made educational concerns known to the new government. They would like a center for higher education on the Eastern Coast. They would also like to extend the bilingual education program in English and Miskito. Both these requests are compatible with the government's educational goals. The plan is to have a primary bilingual education where students in Kindergarten through 4th grade are taught in their native tongue. Spanish as a Second Language is included in the curriculum until grade five, when most of the instruction would be given in Spanish. (Diskin et al., 1986:19)

The attainment of these goals appears a long way off. First, the available trained teachers would need to learn Miskito, and/or fluent Miskito speakers also would have to be Spanish speaking and well enough educated to go through a teacher training program. Second, Spanish textbooks would need to be translated into the Miskito language. Third, textbooks in biology, social science and other subjects which have information specific to the Caribbean Coast would need to be written in the Miskito language. Finding the people and resources to do this is a challenge.

Educational progress in the coastal Caribbean Region might be enhanced by the improvement of the country's infrastructure. Better transportation and communication between regions and a greater economic development of the natural resources could benefit both the region and the nation. If a continued respect for the ethnic identity and autonomy accompanied development, communication and negotiation might remain open, making possible the goal of education for all.

CONCLUSION

Despite limited progress, the two coastal regions are still divided culturally and politically. There are several problems which the government must continue to address: 1) the Eastern Coast's desire for autonomy, 2) the Western Coast's misunderstanding of the ethnic minority, 3) the fighting which undermines the progress made, and 4) the scarcity of teachers, materials and funds for building a strong educational system.

The success attained in literacy training for ethnic groups should be maintained and expanded. Reinforcing literacy through continued adult education and sufficient reading material in the native languages might be politically advantageous. As the Sandinista government makes bilingual education a priority, it may gain more trust and support from the indigenous population.

A bilingual program for indigenous children, recognizing and supporting their first language, while

teaching Spanish for communication could be a national unifying force. Both groups may be more willing to cooperate as they see education succeed.

Strong support for education may be the best way to develop the country. Through a thorough comprehensive educational system, Nicaraguans will be better prepared to take an active part in developing their nation.

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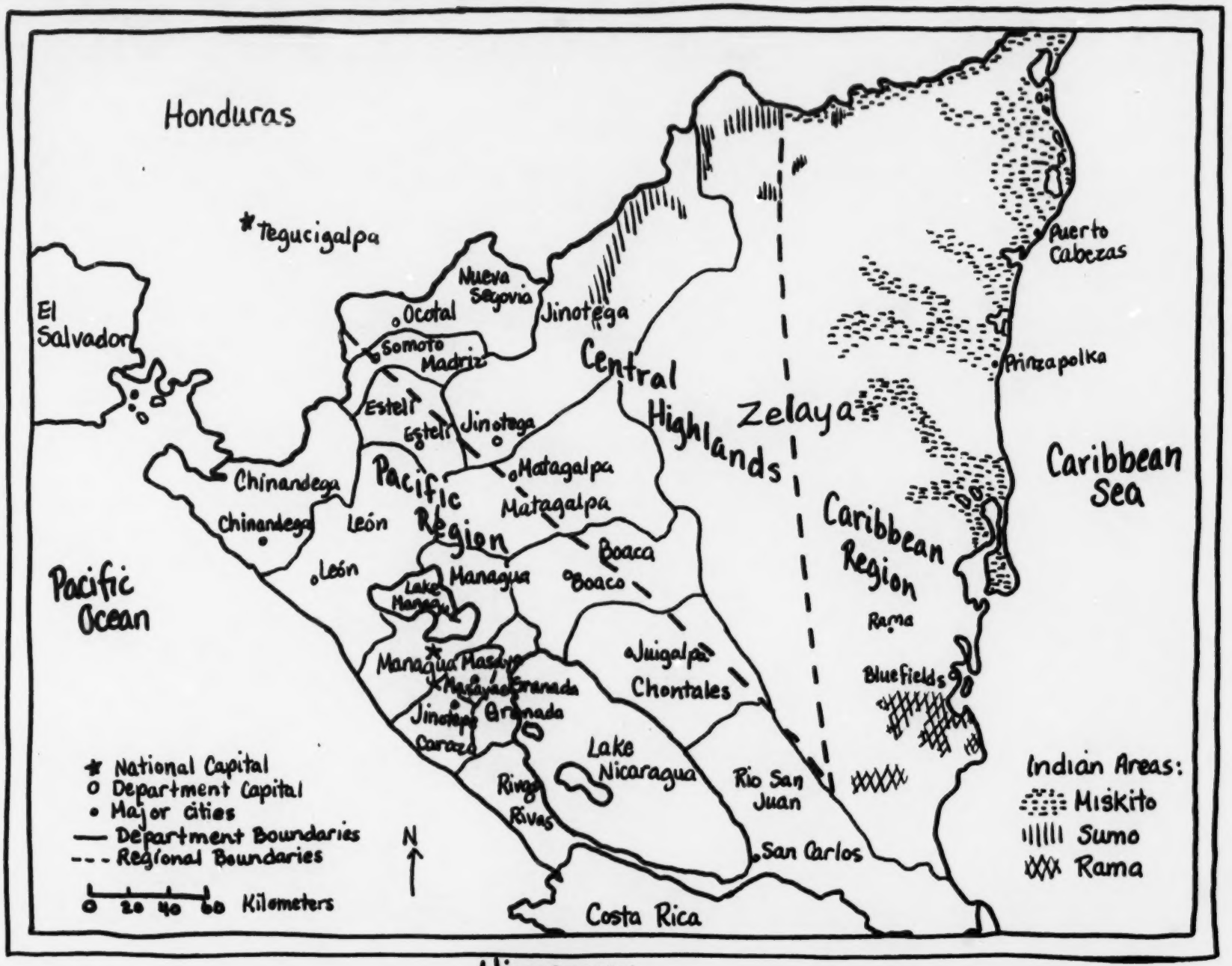
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